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ottish Bird News

No 88 Jun. 2008



Aerobirding



The stunning landscape of the Outer Hebrides from the air

Mark Lewis

Outside the breeding season, many areas of the UK's inshore waters are used by seaducks, divers and grebes as moulting and wintering areas, and migration staging posts. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), on behalf of the four statutory nature conservation agencies, is currently considering which inshore areas should be considered for possible qualification as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for such species during the non-breeding season. As part of this, JNCC has run an annual survey programme since the winter of 2000-01 to collect up-to-date, detailed data on the distribution and abundance of inshore waterbirds, primarily using aerial surveys. Of our 20 target survey areas in Scotland (Figure 1), we currently have at least one year of data for 16 of them. Similar aerial surveys are being carried out throughout the UK, by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. It should be noted that these are simply areas of search and that we are not ready to actually identify specific sites within these areas that might be suitable to recommend as SPAs. Aerial surveys are a suitable method to identify areas with important inshore aggregations of most waterbird species due to the fact that large and sometimes inaccessible areas can be surveyed in a short space of time – this minimises costs and reduces the risk of double counting birds by completing the survey in as short a time as possible.

We use small (5-7 seat) twin-engined aircraft to carry out our aerial surveys. To be suitable for our survey work, they must be capable of cruising at low speeds of 100 knots, giving the observers time to see, identify and gather data on the birds, and they must also have top mounted wings, so that the observers view of the sea below is not obstructed. Conditions are fairly cramped inside the plane, and surveying for sometimes four or five hours at a time can become quite uncomfortable. The pilot flies a set of pre-determined parallel transects at a height of 250 feet. This height has been chosen as a compromise between flying high enough to minimise disturbance, while still being low enough for birds to be identified and recorded. Most species seem to ignore the plane, but a few (such as Common Scoter and Red-breasted Merganser), tend to fly off as the plane approaches. This is not ideal, obviously, but it does make them a little easier to count!

Counting is not straightforward, and time is of the essence. Observers have within three or four seconds to identify and count the birds, and record the data. In areas with few birds this is quite simple, but in some areas with large concentrations or a good variety of species, it can become very difficult. For each observation, time (to the second), species, number and

distance from the observer are recorded into a dictaphone. Observations are assigned to four distance 'bands' within a 1000m strip perpendicular to the flight track. This seems simple enough, but within those four seconds an observer may have recorded, for example, flocks of 200 Common Scoters and 300 Common Eiders, 30 Long-tailed Ducks, two Red-breasted Mergansers and two Great Northern Divers. By the time half of this data has been recorded onto tape, a whole new group of birds will have appeared. It can almost be overwhelming at times, but thankfully, these hectic periods are not the norm, and are usually fairly brief.



The Islander with observers Ben Dean and Mark Lewis

Kerstin Kober

SHOUT
SHARE **IT**





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Identification, too, can be problematic. Time and space restrictions render the use of binoculars impossible, and observers need to spend many training hours in the air honing their identification skills before being ready to survey. Eiders are simple, although females in mixed flocks take a little more looking for, and the relatively huge size of great northern divers usually makes them easy to identify. Unfortunately, of course, it's not always that straightforward. Birds such as Long-tailed Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers take a little getting used to, but it takes close views and perfect conditions to confidently identify a Black-throated Diver. Observers are spared some potential identification headaches by the fact that most scoters take off as the plane approaches, making separation of Commons and Velvet's far easier. Grebes seem to avoid the plane completely; over the last six winters, only seven grebes have been seen (with none being identified specifically), despite surveys regularly covering areas with relatively high grebe numbers, such as the Firth of Forth and Scapa Flow. To overcome such problems of aircraft-shy grebes, and difficulties in separating some diver species, we complement our aerial survey data with targeted shore-based counts.

The weather plays an important role in dictating when aerial surveys can be carried out. Ideal conditions are calm, dry weather and a flat calm sea, with thick, high cloud. Wind is particularly important; choppy seas make it difficult to see birds and strong winds can make surveying dangerous. Fog, rain and low cloud also compromise observer effectiveness, and make life a lot more difficult for the pilot as well! Strong sunlight can also be a great hindrance. Glare from the sea can make it impossible to count birds on some transects, and where

glare is not a problem, bright sunlight reflects strongly off white plumage, "masking" any darker tones, and turning a line of auks into a row of glowing white dots. This can make what should be simple identifications become quite tricky, but the problem can be resolved somewhat by the use of polarising glasses.

What happens then, to all the data that is collected? By linking the data collected by the observers to location data collected during the flights by an onboard GPS (Global Positioning System), it is possible to assign an accurate location to every sighting. This allows us to plot bird distribution maps for each survey area, highlighting where larger concentrations of birds occur, as well as showing which areas are preferred by which species. It is also possible to come up with population estimates for each species within a given area, using a statistical technique called "distance sampling". Based on the assumption that 100% of birds in the first distance band are detected, and using the detection rates for the more distant bands, this technique estimates the number of birds missed and therefore the total population within the area. These population estimates can be compared with national and biogeographic population estimates to assess the relative importance of our survey areas, and consequently whether they meet UK SPA guideline thresholds. We are currently in the process of assessing several Scottish areas for which we have at least five years of data, including the Moray Firth, Aberdeen Bay, Firth of Forth, Firth of Tay, Outer Hebrides, Scapa Flow, Sound of Mull, and the waters around Coll and Tiree.

The mapping of aerial survey data has facilitated the identification of important concentrations of Great Northern Divers in areas such as the west coast of the Sound of Harris, in the Outer Hebrides, and the Sound of Gigha, on the west coast of the Mull of Kintyre. On a broader level, aerial

survey data has also allowed us to re-assess the British wintering population size of Red-throated Divers. Previously the best estimate of this was 5,000, but WWT aerial surveys highlighted the inaccuracy of this when they observed up to 11,000 individuals in just one area (the Greater Thames). The newly revised estimate of the wintering population of this species, based largely on aerial survey data, is now in the region of 17,000 birds (O'Brien *et al.* in press!)

As you might imagine, flying around the coast of Scotland on a clear day offers some truly spectacular views, the cliffs and mountains of Mull, and the peat bogs and expansive sandy bays of Benbecula and the Uists being my own personal favourites. There are other distractions, too. Dolphins and porpoises are seen fairly regularly, and the odd Minke Whale puts in an appearance every now and again. Other birds are seen as well, and highlights over the past few years have included both White-tailed and Golden Eagles, Pomarine Skua, Hen Harrier and Glaucous Gull.

Mark Lewis

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mark.lewis@jncc.gov.uk

Further information

Lewis, M., Wilson, L.J., Söhle, I., Dean, B.J., Webb, A. and Reid, J.B. (2006). Wintering sea ducks, divers and grebes in UK inshore areas: Aerial surveys and shore-based counts 2006/07. *JNCC Report*, No. 414. Available from <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-4300>

O'Brien SH, Wilson LJ, Webb A & Cranswick P. (in press) Revised estimate of numbers of wintering Red-throated Divers *Gavia stellata* in Great Britain. *Bird Study* <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1414>

(Eds. Have a quick look at the photo below which has been taken from an aircraft. Give yourself only a few seconds to study it and try to identify the species. You'll find the answer on the back page.)



Carl Mitchell

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Contributions for the next issue of *SBN* should be submitted not later than 25th July 2008 to:

**SBN Editor, SOC, Scottish
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Articles can be sent on disc or by e-mail (mail@the-soc.org.uk), although we do still accept typed or handwritten material.

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NEWS & NOTICES

New SOC Members

We welcome the following new members to the Club: **Ayrshire** Mr G Boyd, **Borders** Mr J Burns, Ms M Carrel, Mr M Scott, **Caithness** Mr N D Redgate, **Central Scotland** Mr S Muir, **Clyde** Ms J Dodd, Mr A Hamilton, Mr J McFadden, Mr & Mrs E Munro, Mr & Mrs A Tully, **Dumfries** Mr D Wardrope, **England, Wales & NI** Mr & Mrs A Duckers, **Fife** Mr R Job, Mr A C Wood, **Grampian** Mr W J Robertson, **Highland** Mr P Burgin & Ms S Thomson, Mr J G Cormack, Mrs R Jolley, Mr M Wynn, **Lothian** Mr & Mrs A Aitchison, Mr T Bryce, Mrs E L Jack, Mr M Johnston, Prof B C Sykes, Mr D Wild, **Overseas** Mr J Ihanus, **Scotland - no branch** Dr J Frank, **Stewartry** Mr & Mrs K McAnna

200 Club

The latest prizewinners are – **March: 1st** £30 R.L.Gardner **2nd** £20 T.Poyser **3rd** £10 R.S.Smith **April: 1st** £30 Mrs. Denney **2nd** £20 I.Balfour-Paul **3rd** £10 Mrs. Lammie

New members are always welcome. They must be over 18 and Club members. Please contact – Daphne Peirse-Duncombe, Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose, Roxburghshire TD6 9NH

Waterston Wildlife

SOC member John Savory who is often to be seen working in the Library at Waterston House, took this picture of a Hare in the rough ground beside the pond. Apparently it is a regular visitor.



The Brown Hare

John Savory

Dr Jeff Watson

Dr Jeff Watson, the well-known ornithologist and raptor expert, author of the authoritative work on the 'Golden Eagle' and a director of Scottish Natural Heritage, died in September 2007 after a period of illness. The SOC extends its sympathy to his family. A full obituary will appear in the next issue of 'Scottish Birds'.

SBRC has a new Chairman

With the retirement of Roger Riddington from SBRC last year, the post of Chairman fell vacant, and one of our long-serving

members, Alan Brown, has stepped in to become the new SBRC Chairman. Elected in late 2004 to serve a second term on SBRC, Alan had previously been a member between 1984 and 1994 (and its Secretary from 1984 to 1986). He was also a member of BBRC from 1987 to 1995, and has served on the Lothian Birds Records Committee since its inception in 1983. Additionally, while he was local recorder for East Lothian between 1983 and 1989, he was a member of SOC Council (1986 - 1990).

Angus Hogg

Birthday congratulations

In SBN 86 we included a note about Dr Maeve Rusk, referring to the generous collection of books she had donated to the Club. Maeve celebrated her 90th birthday on 3rd May and in lieu of birthday gifts, kindly asked her family and friends to make donations to the SOC. She has been an SOC member since the late 1940s and is well-known for her ornithological contribution regarding the Highlands and Islands. The SOC offers Maeve their congratulations and gratitude for her generous gesture which so far has raised £235.

SOC benefits from the 200 Club

The gradually accumulating funds in the SOC's 200 Club are beginning to be used in some very practical ways at Waterston House. Recently we have seen the acquisition of two fine Velbon tripods, which will be used on the HQ's Guide Walks and Birdwatching for Beginners. A new lap top will be used in the Library Office and a useful Library Trolley will facilitate the moving around of books etc. The 200 Club of course is run by Daphne Peirse-Duncombe who works away in the background keeping the system ticking over and the money coming in, for which we are all extremely grateful.



Tripods in use (above), Jean at work on the laptop



Curlews

Art and Observation

A collection of paintings, sketches and prints by **Derek Robertson** depicting the link between the artist's work, scientific projects and wildlife observations. Showing in Waterston House, Aberlady, from **16 August to 22nd October**.

Derek Robertson is well known for his paintings of wildlife. His work is exhibited around the world and held in collections in over 40 countries. He has also written and illustrated several of his own books as well as contributing to numerous other publications. He has also written and presented several television programmes and appeared regularly in press, radio and television where he describes the paintings he produces and the wildlife and landscape that inspire him. One of the early catalysts to his career was the first publication of his pictures in print... in the SOC's Scottish Bird News.

Since his early teens, Derek has also contributed towards amateur research projects, becoming a licensed bird ringer and developing his own studies, as well as assisting other people. He has served on a number of committees for research organisations, including the BTO Council and Ringing Committee. His own researches have been published in scientific journals and adopted into conservation management plans and survey programs. His contributions to numerous other projects have been recognised in publication and have given him opportunities to study birds at close hand and in the context of enquiries into their habitat and behaviour.



Woodcock pair

This exhibition of paintings sketches and prints, depict the artwork that Derek has produced linked with these studies over the past 20 years and the collaborations he has worked on as assistant, illustrator and enthusiastic helper. There is a strong tradition in ornithology, especially in Scotland, of artists collaborating in ornithological studies, and this collection of paintings, that portrays everything from radio-tracking Water Rails through impenetrable Scottish reedbeds to moult studies of migrant birds in Africa, follows in a long history in which the SOC plays such an important part.

www.derekrobertson.com

Developing the Bird Recording "Habit"

If you've met anyone lately who's done any Atlas fieldwork, you've no doubt heard them say something along the lines of, "It's great, I get out to all sorts of places I'd never have gone to", or, "I get a real sense of satisfaction seeing my dots on the map." In fact, if you know anyone who's doing Atlas fieldwork, chances are you also know an Atlas Addict (or a member of AAA (Atlasing Addicts Anonymous) according to Ray Murray, Atlas Organiser in the Borders!)

The same can be said of lots of other fieldwork, whether it's sending sightings to your local recorder, taking part in the Breeding Bird Survey*, or doing some armchair birdwatching through Garden BirdWatch. Survey volunteers regularly speak of a sense of satisfaction and of seeing new places. (They less often talk about keeping their skills honed - but this is another benefit.)

As Atlas fever sweeps the country, more and more new people are getting involved, many who've never done any form of fieldwork before; such is the flexibility in the Atlas methods, combined with its central importance for conservation over the next 25 years.

If you've ever thought of doing some voluntary bird recording, there has never been a better time to get involved. Yet, amongst those who've not yet tested the bird survey "waters" another common comment is that many birdwatchers feel they lack the skills to take part.

Both BTO and SOC have been offering training courses for a while now, but thanks to a new project, more opportunities are on the horizon for those in Scotland new to bird surveys than ever before. It's all thanks to funding from SNH, The Gillman Trusts, BTO and SOC. Over the next two years there will be talks, free local training courses and promotional materials designed to encourage people from all walks of life to record birds in

Scotland. The programme of training courses is being put together as we speak and will be advertised through SBN and in a new newsletter dedicated to bird survey volunteers in Scotland (which will be sent to all SOC and BTO members in Scotland as well as being distributed more widely).

Because the engine-house of bird recording is the network of regional survey organisers, local recorders and branch reps, the funding will also support them in their voluntary roles through a series of national meetings. The first was held in February, and the next will be held over the weekend of 23rd August. The national meetings give local reps and organisers the chance to meet other reps from all over Scotland, to share experiences, hear the latest news on survey plans and progress and most importantly, the chance to input to the new project. After all, they're the ones on the front line, who know what the volunteers need.

So if you're not already a bird recording "addict", think about coming along to a local talk or even better a training course, or just dive straight in and contact your local rep (contact details at www.bto.org/regional or contact the BTO Scotland office below). We'll be delighted to hear from you. Who knows, maybe the next time you're chatting to another birdwatcher, you'll be telling them how satisfying you find it seeing your dots on the Atlas maps. As an SOC member, it is even more likely that you may know of a friend that is interested, but not yet as experienced as yourself. So pass on this invitation to them - perhaps more younger people may also take up this opportunity, especially with your encouragement and expertise.



Jacqui out recording

Andrew Macaulay

For more information on the Building Bird Monitoring in Scotland project, including signing up for free local training courses please contact **Jacqui Kaye**, BTO Scotland at scotlandbbs@bto.org or telephone 01786 466 560.

* The BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) is organised by the BTO on behalf of BTO, JNCC and RSPB.

**BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch is the largest year-round study of garden birds anywhere in the world.

March BTO/SOC Conference



The venue

Lang Stewart

Biram Arts and Conference centre in its scenic Perthshire setting, was this year's venue for the March BTO/SOC Conference. Delegates were welcomed by Andy Clement, Director of the BTO, who spoke about bird monitoring in Scotland, highlighting the Bird Atlas work and its species sponsorship by organisations and businesses. He also made a point of praising the successful launch of "The Birds of Scotland" noting its remarkable quality and contribution to ornithological literature, before commenting on the suitability of this year's Conference theme "Birds of Moor and Mountain" and introducing the first speaker.



Entrance hall

Lang Stewart

Suki Fleming - Conservation Officer for Tayside & Fife (RSPB)

Conserving Perthshire's Upland Birds
Suki chose to illustrate her theme using two main upland species, Red Kite and Black Grouse. The Red Kite reintroduction programme, supported by RSPB, Natural England and SNH, began in 1989. Currently the main work of the programme is to monitor the expanding population, to investigate variations in breeding success and the survival of adults. Many chicks are colour-tagged so that the life history of individuals can be followed. Some birds are radio-tagged so that their movements can be monitored and any deaths investigated. In spite of persistent

persecution, mainly by poisoning, the breeding population is increasing, with 19 pairs currently in Perthshire.

The conservation of Black Grouse is based on extending and improving their potentially extensive habitat. The Perthshire Black Grouse Study Group has existed for 17 years, monitoring an area of 700 km² around Pitlochry. The extensive conifer forests planted in the 1960s to 1980s were good for Black Grouse in the first 10 years of their life, but as the tree canopy closed the grouse were progressively excluded. In more recent years fellings have begun and with a new policy of diversifying the forest habitats as well as the age-class structure of the stands, insect-rich and berry-rich vegetation is being created within and on the edges of the forests adjacent to moorland. The number of lekking males, having declined from 900 to 300 in the Study Area has, after a period of stability, slowly begun to increase.

Operation Countrywatch aims to prevent wildlife crime in west Perthshire and began in 2000, involving Police, Raptor Study Group and 5 estates. The project promotes mutual understanding of attitudes and needs and of the relevant laws. The project has been successful and it is hoped to involve more estates.

Graham Pyatt



Suki Fleming

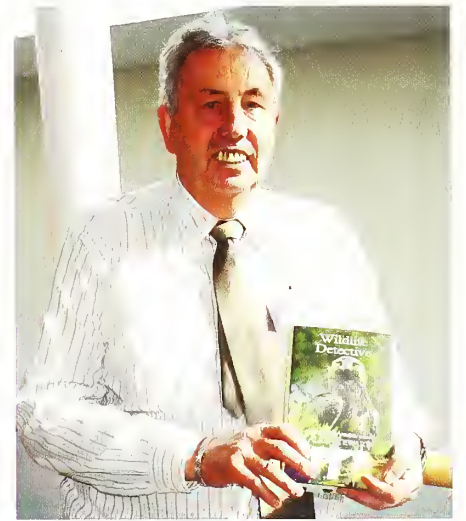
Lang Stewart

Allan Stewart - Wildlife and Environment Officer (Tayside police)

Wildlife Detective

Allan managed to be both informative and entertaining with his account of his career in the Tayside Police; a career that somehow didn't even stop with his retirement.

The old problem of raptors being poisoned by carcasses staked out with a liberal dose of Carbofuran still remains, and it can be difficult to get a conviction. Allan suggested that it may be better to concentrate instead on trying to prevent a re-occurrence. Egg collectors may be less numerous these days, but those that remain are often very well equipped with the best climbing gear, bolt cutters etc. They often emulate drug traffickers with secret compartments in their cars to conceal their latest trophies.



Alan Stewart

Lang Stewart

Educating the public can be an important part of the job and may be the best hope for long-term improvements – however Allan's visits to primary schools had occasionally shown remarkable levels of ignorance about birds in both P5–P7 children and even their mothers. He also pointed out that an awareness of the law can often produce very rapid results – one developer who was about to start renovating a building containing several swallows' nests suddenly postponed the job when he was told that the penalty could be up to £5000 per nest with a possibility of imprisonment. The police in Scotland are now taking wildlife crime more seriously than 10 years ago. Four out of eight forces now have full-time wildlife crime officers.

The job can have its lighter moments. A suspicious looking tent near a Golden Eagle's nest turned out to contain nothing more sinister than a man who thought he had found a nice private spot to try on some women's underwear.

R. Hissett



Manning the BTO stand

Jimmy Maxwell

Time now for Tea and Coffee and a chance for delegates to have a look round, perhaps have a glance at Allan's new Wild Crime Detective book and catch up with old friends - then lectures resumed...

Bob Swann - Scottish Atlas Organiser (BTO/SOC)

Mony a mickle maks a muckle

Bob's lecture centred on the importance of the contribution of the individual to survey work. All the different surveys involving BTO and SOC were covered and many current changes in habitat discussed - the impact of deer on upland bird populations - the changing nature of afforested areas with the effects of windblow and benefits of mixed deciduous and conifer, and the growing importance of gardens for our small birds. He highlighted ways in which bird populations were affected by windfarms, developed mud-flats, newly industrialised areas and farmland where hedges were lost and set-aside discontinued. Unsurprisingly, the winter tetrads of the Atlasing Project in which Bob has been so involved, were given some focus - Barn Owl had shown a surprising increase in territory, Black-tailed Godwits and Goldfinches were on the increase while Mallard and House sparrows were the opposite. The 4-year Project had got off to a great start and many new surveyors were now getting involved.

Jimmy Maxwell

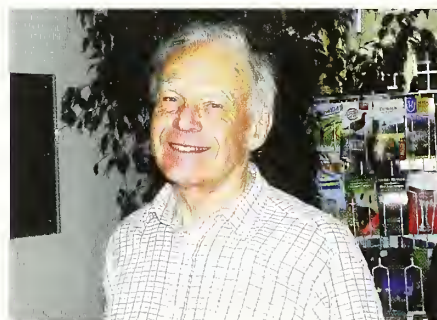
David Merrie - (Tay SOC)

The Diver Raft Story

This story began some 40 years ago in the late 1960s, when David became aware of the poor breeding productivity of Black-throated and Red-throated Divers in Argyll. His investigations into the causes of this indicated that, in addition to disturbance, nest failures resulting from flooding or stranding as water levels fell, were a major contributory factor. As divers favoured islands for nesting, where these were available, David came up with the idea of providing floating islands, as platforms on which the divers might choose to nest. He then explained the design adopted, which used plastic bottles for buoyancy tied together with netting on

which turf was placed to give as natural an appearance as possible. The first raft was deployed in 1976 and apart from having to change to plastic netting to prevent rotting, the design of subsequent rafts was virtually unchanged. The work involved in this project was significant, not least in getting the rafts to their locations and David paid tribute to the many people and organisations that helped him to achieve his aims, namely his family, friends and employer - on occasion, even helicopter assistance was provided! By 1979 ten rafts were in use and breeding productivity from the birds using these was 0.7 as against 0.16 for birds using natural nest sites. This showed that the use of rafts had been a major success, particularly for Red-throated Divers. The outcome of David's pioneering work on diver rafts encouraged the Forestry Commission and, subsequently the RSPB, to take on the provision of such rafts, albeit of a different design, from the mid-1980s to try to further improve the breeding productivity of divers in Scotland. Welcome improvements in breeding success did occur. However, David reported that worrying trends have become apparent recently and wondered whether the increased noise associated with the use of quad bikes and Argocats near nesting birds was affecting breeding success. Also, he thought that predation by mustelids was on the increase. In concluding this most interesting talk, David said he had had great fun throughout his raft saga and remained upbeat about the future.

John Reid



David Merrie

Lang Stewart

Lunch was served in a local hotel after which delegates were able to browse round the BTO, SOC (£525 made in sales), SWT and optics stands and admire Eric McCabe's photos and cards as a taster for the next lecture.

Eric McCabe - (Tay SOC)

Shooting in a Perthshire Estate

"Artists take you into the wilderness, making you wish you had been there, or they return you in memory to where you have been. Artists are priests!" Spectrus.

Eric McCabe is just such a man of vision, a Wildlife Photographer whose pictures

are always great to see, but to hear his live commentary on the "how" of technique, his fieldcraft - his diplomatic skills. That is another thing that artist-priests do, they show and tell some of the secrets that are 2/3 beneath their surface.

Having gained the freedom to roam the Ballathie Estate with the support of its keepers and ghillies, this photo-guided tour began in the winter farmlands landscape.

Looking at trees "from the top down", finding Redwing and Fieldfares feeding on berries, then these winter thrushes bathing - ending in a lovely sequence of Red Squirrel on the forest floor.

Oak woodland in spring is carpeted by Bluebells with colours so intense, raked by dramatic tree-shadows! Nature's Liturgy is theatrical of course but to capture it in camera! The audience gasped a quiet applause.

The hide introduction - perfect timing for more insight into Eric's craft and intuition, preparing the feeding stations and pond with what I think photographers call "gardening". Some of the usual suspects were thus bound to appear - Royal/real command performances - Hare and Squirrel ... but then - something landing on the hide - a Purple Hairstreak butterfly - a new record for the site!

Having admitted - "I have no garden at home", this craftsman has all of nature as his playground where with sagacity and agility he records the fleeting moments of an interaction between adult and juvenile Great Spotted Woodpeckers - and that confrontation between young Jay and Woodpecker. What do youngsters of the wild world over make of it all? These are not mere portraits of creatures but are events in their lives which he shares with us! even those marauding food thieves, the Pheasants are part of this wild garden story, with a supporting cast of Treecreeper, Spotted Flycatcher - all stunning photographs.

A grand salmon beat worth £1.5M became the final habitat for shooting - rapid sequences of Skylark in songflight; a series zooming in tight on a Reed Bunting; Sedge Warbler; a pair of Ringed Plover on the shingle shore; then for sheer beauty, a Common Tern nesting in Lupins!

Renowned for his photography of Insectivora his lens encounter with the Mayfly "Yellow Sally" is a tour de force, not just one alone but a mating pair! Other interesting observed behaviour: Mediterranean Gull male mating with Common Gull in a colony - recorded in the BTO archive, of course.

End with Kingfisher nest sequences on motor drive? Of course he did! encored by a Sand Martin taken by a Kestrel! then for a final bow ... a Long-eared Owl with chick. Applause invades the auditorium - a wonderful wildlife experience with Eric through his lens, priestly patience and his words.

Duncan Watt



John Calladine

Lang Stewart

John Calladine - Research Ecologist (BTO Scotland)

Ptarmigan: can hill walkers survey them?

In his usual engaging manner, John described the BTO's "Project Ptarmigan" carried out in summer 2006. This was no ordinary survey undertaken by birders but an innovative attempt to involve a group of outdoor enthusiasts who meet upland birds during their normal recreation - hill walking. Being our only resident arctic-alpine species at the southern limit of its range, Ptarmigan are notoriously difficult to monitor, with few birders venturing into their territories on a regular basis. Hill walkers pursue their hobby right across the Scottish Highlands and this was a test to see if a group of relatively inexperienced observers could detect and count one species in a relatively meaningful manner (although over 40 additional species were also recorded). We have surprisingly little information about how this species reacts to grazing pressure, disturbance and climate change, the latter including exposure and snow lie as well as rising temperatures. John revealed that, after a high profile targeting of the mountaineering community, the response was magnificent, with over 600 forms returned and well over 1000 Ptarmigan counted almost right across the species' range. Both feathers and piles of droppings were also noted, and counts of Red Grouse were used to assess the proportion of piles that might be attributable to Ptarmigan (there being no way for most of

us to tell the difference!). Naturally there are some drawbacks to this method of gaining information, one being the reluctance of some walkers to send in nil returns. Another seemed to be spring snow cover, which both birds (to find food) and walkers (to walk more safely) may have tended to avoid, thus resulting in a higher encounter rate (the number of birds seen per km of transect route). Nevertheless, the distribution of Ptarmigan was not too dissimilar to that determined during the last breeding atlas in 1988-91. The encounter rate was highest in the Cairngorms and lowest from Breadalbane to Argyll. It was also reassuringly similar to rates found by professional ornithologists and it showed that even simple methods devised for non-ornithologists can yield a significant result.

Norman Elkins

Sir John Lister-Kaye, OBE - Aigas Field Centre

Song of the Rolling Earth

Naturally a birdwatchers' Conference titled "Birds of Moor and Mountain" would include some very detailed and scientific papers on upland birds. However our guest and final speaker, Sir John Lister-Kaye chose to use his book title "Song of the Rolling Earth" and embarked on a very emotional, personal, and even intimate celebration of his own experience as a highland naturalist, and this is a very wide experience indeed. In this company of ornithologists, he boasted of being a generalist not an —'ologist'! This attitude did not preclude some very minutely accurate accounts of his history, his commitment to oppose the funicular railway project because of its threat to the vulnerable Cairngorm Plateau and the ensuing battles with the politicians of the day. Battles! There was an invocation of Culloiden and the past clan system and a dip into the sad history that has degraded



Sir John Lister-Kaye

Lang Stewart

our highland environment with the progression from the clearances, to sheep, to stalking and the grouse moor. The blanket forestation of sitka spruce and the mismanagement of the Flow country were later mistakes. Sir John's hopes and ambitions for the highlands were liberally sprinkled with poetry quotations. Here is a man steeped in the romantic poets! Also frequent references were made to people like George Waterston, Roy Dennis, John Love and Frank Fraser Darling; legends in the eyes of the SOC. This was no sad tale of things past to be mourned; no it was full of hope, optimism and what is possible. His venture into the future included some surprisingly revealing anecdotes of his beaver project with intimate insights into his family life, notably with his daughter Hermione and her adopting of his mantle for the next generation. Yes this was indeed 'A Rolling Song of the Earth', - and why shouldn't our Conference be a platform for its performance?

Campbell McLellan



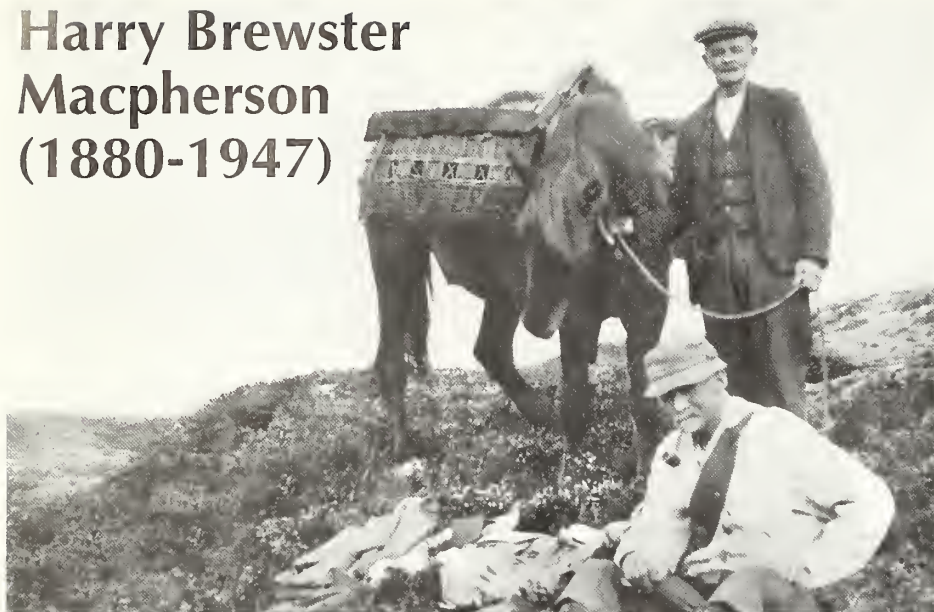
Wendy Hicks holds the raffle

Lang Stewart

After Wendy Hicks presided over the raffle (which made £214) and the Mystery Bird Quiz winner (Mark Holling) was revealed, Chris Waltho, SOC President, drew the Conference to a close. He summarised all the positive signs of improvement in the conservation of wildlife which had been voiced by the speakers, including also a mention of the low points of raptor persecution and the need in some areas for better land management. He thanked all those involved in the day's proceedings, especially BTO Scotland and Tayside SOC for their excellent hosting of the event, the staff members involved and notably Stephen Hunter for his sterling struggles in keeping sound and vision running smoothly throughout. Lastly he wished delegates a safe journey home and invited them to next year's event which would be on 21st March 2009, in Dumfries.

Jimmy Maxwell

Harry Brewster Macpherson (1880-1947)



Harry B. Macpherson on Balavil Estate with his ghillie Jock Robertson Courtesy of Allan Macpherson-Fletcher

In Vol. 1 of *Birds of Scotland* (Forrester et al. (2007), Norman Tait has written short notes on some of the early Scottish bird photographers. Here he takes more time to give us a vivid account of one of them.

Open any recently published bird magazine or bird book and you will be presented with superb high-quality colour illustrations of birds in action - singing, flying and interacting. Gone are the static portraits of birds sitting on eggs. However, the pioneers of bird photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were delighted to produce such images. Cameras of that era were made of brass and wood and they were bulky, cumbersome and slow to operate. The standard format was known as half-plate (4 $\frac{1}{2}$ X 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches) and boxes of unexposed glass plates were a considerable weight to carry around.

Emulsion technology was in its infancy and the materials available were not very sensitive to light. The bird-at-nest genre of bird photography continued basically unchanged until the 1950s when smaller light-weight cameras, better film technology and more powerful telephoto lenses became readily available giving the photographer the ability to stalk birds in the field and to record many off-nest activities.

I gave a talk recently on natural history photography to a local camera club. My talk began with pictures taken by pioneer Scottish bird photographers and information about the trials and tribulations which they had to endure to produce an acceptable photograph. At the end of the meeting I was approached by Zul Bhatia, warden at the RSPB Lochwinnoch Reserve. He enquired why I had not included the

work of Harry Brewster Macpherson in my talk. My answer was simple - I had never heard of him! Zul then told me that when he was warden at the RSPB Insh Marshes Reserve he had made the acquaintance of Allan Macpherson-Fletcher of Balavil. His uncle was the aforementioned Harry Macpherson who had photographed Golden Eagles at their nest in 1909. An illustrated book containing 32 photographs and a detailed account of the photographer's time spent observing the birds' behaviour at their eyrie was published during the same year.

In the Mitchell Library catalogue in Glasgow, I found Harry's book (ref. no. D270887) and I was greatly impressed by the intimate close-ups he had taken of the eagles and by the great love and understanding he showed for his subjects. He writes: *"The hindquarters of a rabbit, freshly torn open and partially devoured, was the only article of food in the eyrie, and had been placed by the old birds beyond the reach of the young. The cold, however, was intense, and the dark lowering clouds above foretold rain or snow. This was a difficulty which I had not foreseen, for, though the nest was warmly lined with thick grass and heather, the eaglets were extremely sensitive to cold. I therefore covered them with my cap while the camera was being arranged..."*

The reproduction quality of the photographs in the book was poor and I set out to locate the original photographs. To find out more about Harry Macpherson and his photography, I contacted Allan Macpherson-Fletcher who was delighted to tell me about his uncle for whom he has a great affection. A visit was arranged and I was invited into his study where a large leather-bound photograph album lay on the writing-desk. The album contained enlargements of Harry Macpherson's eagle pictures - what a treat indeed! Sadly, there were no pictures of Harry with his camera. Apparently he was a quiet and unassuming man who shunned publicity and was known affectionately as "the Birdman of Balavil". There were more surprises to come. Harry had also photographed many other bird species in and around Strathspey. I found a treasure trove of unpublished large, titled photographs of Dotterel with

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Dotterel Courtesy of Allan Macpherson-Fletcher

A camera advert from the time

chicks, Capercaillie and greyhen sitting on their nests, nesting Black-headed Gulls, Mountain Hares in winter pelage etc. Some years ago high quality enlargements had been prepared from the original glass plate negatives for a display at the Clan Macpherson Museum in Newtonmore which featured Harry Macpherson's pioneering wildlife photography.



Capercaillie brooding

Courtesy of Allan Macpherson-Fletcher

Harry Brewster Macpherson was the 5th Laird of Balavil, an estate situated north of Kingussie (Badenoch & Strathspey). Compared to many of his contemporaries, he was an unusual landowner - he preferred shooting with a camera and not with a gun! Having acquired an interest in natural history at an early age, he was involved during the early years of the 20th century in photographing birds and other animals.

In 1906 Harry decided that he wished to study and photograph the Golden Eagle. He and some ghillies searched the surrounding area for three years before an accessible eyrie suitable for photography was found high in the hills near Gaick. Telephoto lenses were not as powerful then as they are today and it was necessary to work as close to the nest as possible. Harry's first attempt at photographing the eagles took place on the 19th May 1909. He hid his camera among stones near the nest and attached to the camera shutter a long length of rubber tubing with a pneumatic bulb at the other end. The tubing was extended to a hiding place out of view from the eyrie. A retreat was then made to a distant vantage point from which the nest could be viewed. After some time the eagle returned to the eyrie. Harry now had to make a very careful approach to the selected hiding place and squeeze the bulb to fire the camera. Obviously the bird could not be seen by him and only one picture could be taken by this method. What was needed was a "shelter" near the eyrie. On the 25th May 1909, he began the construction of a hide on a nearby ledge where he excavated a cavity, built stone walls on three sides and constructed a roof of canvas, grass and heather. Visits were made almost daily over three months with Harry crouched in the

hide for periods of 12-16 hours. The poor springtime weather in the high hills resulted in rather long camera exposures of 1/12th sec. at f8. This could not capture much action without the subject being blurred. The author also noted that some pictures required a 10 sec. exposure in evening light using an "Ultra Rapid Plate". This was only possible when the bird stood motionless on

the nest when alarmed or suspicious.

The resulting photographs were the first intimate portraits of nesting Golden Eagles, ranging from the adult birds feeding the young to the first flight attempts of the eaglet. These unique pictures appeared in a book entitled *Home-Life of a Golden Eagle* (1909) published by Witherby & Co. of London as part of their Birdlover's Home-Life series. A further quote from this remarkable book shows how greatly Harry was moved by his unique experience. No one before him had been so privileged. Not even Seton Gordon, well-known for his life-long studies of the Golden Eagle, had been able to study this majestic bird in such detail because Gordon did not use hides until after 1914.



Golden Eagle Courtesy of Allan Macpherson-Fletcher

"For the first time in my life I was now alone with the eagles in a hiding place commanding a view of the nest. The young eagle was asleep and lay curled up, a mere bunch of white down, in the huge structure. The wind moaned in strange, piercing gusts which echoed and re-echoed from the rocks, and the burn roared furiously in spate below. A frail wall of stones alone separated me from the edge of the cliff, and through my peep-hole I could see the mist rolling in

endless wreaths along the opposite face, though as yet the nest itself was clear. An hour passed by and still the eaglet slept, protected from the drenching rain by the ledge of rock projecting from above. At 1.30pm, a dark shadow flitted across the peep-hole, and, peering cautiously out, I saw the giant bird sitting on the ledge close to the nest. The eaglet was now squeaking lustily, but the mother had brought no food and seemed restless, staying for only a few seconds before she flapped away. Ten minutes later she settled again on the edge of the eyrie, and seemed quite unsuspecting of my hiding-place. She was gazing anxiously at the sleeping eaglet, and, with a sudden rush of wings, the cock lit beside her on the ledge. He had brought with him the hindquarters of a rabbit which he carried in one powerful foot. As if satisfied that all was well, the pair retired, and I took advantage of the interval to remove and clean the lens which had become clouded with the mist and rain. The dark slides also were swollen with the wet, and the shelter was dripping in several places, while I myself, soaked more or less to the skin, was sitting literally in a pool of water."

Harry Macpherson was not the first person to publish photographs of the nest, eggs and young of the Golden Eagle. That credit goes to Richard and Cherry Kearton from Swaledale in Yorkshire. In the early 1890s, they frequently visited Scotland to photograph as many of the Scottish birds' nest and eggs which they could locate. Their aim was to illustrate a book entitled *British Birds' Nests*. On a visit to Mull in 1893, they took pictures at a Golden Eagle eyrie. When their book was published in 1895, it was to be the first natural history book produced in Britain illustrated throughout with mechanically printed reproductions "taken from real photographs."

To successfully photograph such a shy and retiring bird as the Golden Eagle, the photographer has to be able to spend two or three months devoted exclusively to such a project. Harry Macpherson was in a unique position to succeed. He had the time and resources to locate the most suitable nest for photography and the time to make a detailed study of this iconic Scottish raptor. Harry was the first person in Britain to photograph the adult at its nest and he was the first to publish a book about this raptor. He may have published only one book but, for its time, it was a remarkable accomplishment. After World War 1, Harry gave up natural history photography and dedicated himself to gardening. One wonders what he might have come up with for a second book had he continued to pursue his wildlife photography!

T. Norman Tait

The Uplands - time to change?



Braeriach and Cairn Toul, Cairngorms

Jill Matthews

Scotland's uplands comprise some of our wildest and most special places. Our great upland landscapes are the product of geological processes, climate and the influence of man, who, since the last ice age, cleared the great forests, drained wetlands, established enclosures and improved soils for grazing and cropping. The arrival of the first settlers and eventual establishment of basic agriculture was commensurate with the loss and eventual extinction of a range of grazing and top-order predatory animals such as the Lynx, Bear and Wolf. Whilst change has been continual, the rate of change has probably never been greater than in the last 250 years, when people were cleared from the more fertile upland areas, game management commenced and much more recently, forestry and agriculture all came to dominate the way we use the land. Despite the popular belief that our hill and mountain areas are wild or even wilderness areas, it is clear that what remains is very much the product of the interaction between people and the land.

Today our uplands, face ever-greater challenges with near unprecedented changes in climate likely to impact on people and the land. A strange thing climate change! On the one hand, the effects are often presented to us as near insurmountable, indeed often worse. However, despite such gloomy predictions, we fail to make any sort of meaningful changes to the way we use and manage the land and indeed live our lives. Are we in denial or is it simply that the scale of the task is beyond our comprehension? Governments, for example, tend

to think on a short-term basis, thereby failing to articulate the sort of long-term vision, essential to underpin the rationale for the way we use our uplands both now and in the future. This lack of leadership and action is hardly helpful.

Over the last two years, the RSPB has been working to develop a vision for the uplands, to clarify how we manage our estate. Over a third of our entire estate, which extends to some 140,000 ha, is in the uplands of Scotland. In developing a vision, we recognise that we need a clear description of how we want the uplands to be used and managed as a whole, and of course, to share our ideas with the full range of stakeholders with an interest in the uplands.

Scotland's uplands comprise approximately 70% (5.7 million ha) of the land cover of Scotland and include iconic landscapes, including both the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Parks and a number of wonderful National Scenic Areas. Of course, there is much more to our uplands than stunning views! These places support an array of habitats and species, many of which are of international importance, and are afforded special protection measures such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas and Ramsar sites. Some very special areas are managed specifically for nature conservation (e.g. National Nature Reserves), but in the main our protected areas are managed for a range of different objectives.

The Scottish uplands comprise an array of special habitats including, internationally

important blanket bog, upland heaths (including heather moor), the Caledonian pine woods, oak and birch woods and of course freshwater habitats such as the lochs and rivers that are such a characteristic feature of the Scottish landscape.

Special birds are at the heart of our uplands. Here we find an array of birds, a number of which are red-listed as Birds of Conservation Concern, Annex 1 species under the EC Birds Directive and UK Biodiversity Action Plan species. Scotland also has its own biodiversity listings. These include iconic birds like Black Grouse, Black-throated Diver, Golden Eagle, Dotterel, some woodland specialists like Scottish Crossbill and Capercaillie and a number of other threatened birds including Common Scoter, Ring Ouzel, Twite and a suite of rare breeding birds like Red-necked Phalarope, Slavonian Grebe, Snow Bunting and Wood Sandpiper and of course the much maligned Hen Harrier. Our list of special birds also includes a number of widely dispersed species that are declining in some areas e.g. Curlew, Dunlin, Golden Plover and Lapwing.

Whilst many of our upland birds are declining, some such as the Black-throated Diver, Golden Eagle, Merlin and Peregrine are perhaps doing better and some are even increasing following long-term re-introduction work. Surely, we should strive to do all in our power to secure the status of our most special birds, in the face of a changing climate and any associated land use change.

Table 1 overleaf summarises the current status of some of our key upland birds. For a full account of how birds are faring in the uplands, the reader is urged to read the SOC's superb 'The Birds of Scotland'.



Fig 4
The British Uplands showing SPAs and SACs

Our uplands are special! In addition to the wealth of natural capital these places hold, the Scottish uplands are places where people live and work, many actually associated with management of the land itself. Wherever we look, both above and below the ground, there is evidence of past settlement, in the shape of former dwellings, signs of cultivation and of course more obvious signs of ancient societies (e.g. brochs, standing stones). We must also acknowledge that some areas were formerly more heavily populated in the past.

So how are our uplands currently used and what sort of impacts are these land uses having on our uplands? The principal land uses in our hill and mountain areas are hill farming, game management and forestry. These land uses, along with tourism and service-provision, are the bedrock of the rural economy in the uplands.

Farming

Over thousands of years, farmers have cleared and improved the land, through establishing enclosures, removing trees and scrub, draining wet areas, improving soils, establishing cultivation and rearing livestock, principally sheep and cattle. Throughout the UK, our upland areas are designated as Less Favoured Areas (LFA), mainly because of the nature of the terrain, low soil productivity and distance from markets etc. The difficulty of farming



Upland farmland, Donside

Ian Francis

profitably in the uplands is recognised, through the provision of associated public support or subsidy. In Scotland, farmers in the Less Favoured Area receive roughly £61 million in LFA payments. Farming is also supported via the Single Payment Scheme and via a range of other support measures, such as agri-environment payments. In the Highlands and Islands, much of the area is farmed less intensively under crofting tenure.

Game management

Large parts of the Scottish uplands are managed for red grouse shooting, deer stalking (principally Red Deer) and game fishing (Salmon, Sea Trout, Brown Trout). In Scotland, the sporting management rights are often held separately from other

land management rights, with the result that rights-holders may have different management objectives. This can result in conflict between farmers, crofters and game managers. A hill farmer seeks to manage large areas of hill land (heath and bog), perhaps using fire, to secure spring grazing for sheep and cattle. The game manager on the other hand may use fire to create a more intricate patchwork of heather across a whole landscape for the benefit of red grouse. Deer managers may sometimes hold numbers of deer that are incompatible with livestock numbers or indeed with the wider biodiversity interest of an area. Deer may encroach on better land, damage crops and compete with livestock for grazing. The impacts of deer on biodiversity, through grazing

Table 1. The status and population of Scotland's priority upland birds

Species	Status (distribution & population)	UK Population	Scottish Population
Black grouse	Historic decline across GB. Range contracting and numbers declining	5,078	3,344
Black-throated diver	Numbers increasing but population vulnerable	217)	217
Capercaillie	Conservation activity confined to woodland in Scottish Highlands	1,980	1,980
Common scoter	Historic decline in Scotland & Northern Ireland. Scarce breeder (<100 pairs)	52	52
Curlew	Major declines across large parts of UK	107,000	71,871
Dotterel	Confined to montane zone. Particularly vulnerable to climate change	510-750	510-750
Dunlin	Declines in some parts of range	9,150-9,900	?
Golden eagle	Historic decline. Persecution currently limiting distribution	442	442
Golden plover	Mixed fortunes	22,600	?
Hen harrier	Historic decline. Persecution limiting distribution in parts of range	806	633
Lapwing	Declining	156,000	91,159
Merlin	Population recovering after historic declines	1,100-1,500	800
Peregrine	Increasing following historic decline. Persecution remains a threat in some areas	1,402	592
Red grouse	Declining where moorland management has ceased in SW England, Wales & Northern Ireland	155,000	?
Red-necked phalarope	Scarce breeder (<100 pairs)	31	31
Ring ouzel	Declining, particularly at edge of range. Some declines in Scotland in core parts of range	6,157-7,549	4,300-5,500
Scottish crossbill	Conservation activity confined to woodland in Scottish Highlands	300-1,250	300-1,250
Short-eared owl	Population fluctuates	1,000-3,500	?
Slavonian grebe	Scarce breeder (<100 pairs)	39	39
Snow bunting	Scarce breeder (<100 pairs)	70-100	70-100
Twite	Range contracting and numbers declining	6,300-14,600	5,600-13,800
Wood sandpiper	Rare breeder (<10 pairs)	4-8	4-8



Black Grouse

(RSPB Images)

(browsing) and trampling are well documented, as are the impacts of the game manager (particularly grouse moor manager) on birds of prey. Throughout Scotland, the illegal persecution of birds of prey is a persistent problem, with evidence that the breeding success and population of Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier and Peregrine Falcon are all limited in grouse moor areas by illegal killing. The widespread killing of some of our most special birds remains a key issue and a major obstacle to more positive dialogue about the role of the game manager in the uplands. The reader should note however, that other problems in the uplands also required to be tackled.

Forestry and woodland

The establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1919, triggered a major expansion in woodland cover, particularly in the uplands. Huge areas of forest were established in the southwest of Scotland, the northern and central Highlands. Large areas of semi-natural open habitat, particularly, bog, heath and rough grass, were lost along with the range of birds these open habitats supported. In some areas, remnant patches of native Caledonian pinewood were lost or surrounded by new plantations, thereby threatening their long-term viability. In Scotland, we now have an estimated 1.3 million ha of woodland, the vast majority of which is in the uplands. It is fair to say that losses of open habitats would have been even greater, had more game managers decided to

invest in trees rather than grouse and deer. These are more enlightened times. It is important to acknowledge that the Forestry Commission Scotland and the private sector are committed, along with others, to the expansion of the Caledonian pine forest, the protection of important deep peat soils and the recovery of iconic woodland birds like the Capercaillie and Black Grouse.

This then is the backdrop to our thinking.

It is not clear what the future holds for hill farming, game management and forestry. What is clear is that the recent formalising of access right, the desire to develop renewable energy, particularly from wind and perhaps biomass and an increasing awareness of the importance of peat soils (especially deep peat soils), in terms of carbon storage and uptake, is likely to further raise the stakes in the uplands. A changing climate and market reforms, with associated changes in support for hill farming support further complicate the issue.

Any discussion about change must embrace an understanding of the current pattern of land use, the well being of local people and of course the wider interests of society as a whole who derive so much from the uplands. It is also important to consider any desired change in the context of both the past and the future, particularly predicted changes in climate.

What do we want?

Perhaps predictably, we want to reverse the declines of some of our priority upland birds. This may not be an appropriate aspiration for all birds, particularly those that currently breed in highest densities in more degraded or intensively managed areas of bog and heather moor. Here, I think we need to try to secure sustainable populations. We must also continue to work with others to bring iconic wildlife back to those parts of Scotland where it is missing, as a direct consequence of mans activity. This

means we need to develop a more enlightened approach to the role of predators, particularly our birds of prey, some of which continue to disappear, die and breed unsuccessfully in large parts of our countryside, particularly those areas managed for driven grouse shooting. We need to be much more innovative in our approach.

We want to deliver our biodiversity commitments (and more) and restore degraded habitats, from valley bottom to mountain top and to manage habitats in a way that allows wildlife to flourish. We need to do this urgently to ensure that our habitats are in the best possible condition, thereby giving them the best chance to survive the rigours of a changing climate.

We also want something more fundamental. As we have seen, large parts of the uplands are managed for a variety of objectives (farming, game management, forestry). Yet these same areas are where much of our drinking water is gathered, hold vast reserves of peat, are at the heart of an expanding wind-energy industry, are home to our special wildlife and of course are at the heart of Scotland's out door leisure, recreation and visitor economies. We urgently need a more integrated approach to land-use policy and a fit-for-purpose suite of support measures that supports and sustains land-use that delivers the full range of benefits that are important to our physical and spiritual well being. Land use and land management go hand-in-hand. Farmers, game-managers and foresters manage land at a landscape scale. Our birds require a variety of habitats at a scale that fits their ecological requirements. In the main, our birds require habitats that are diverse in structure, composition and species. Current management practices such as livestock grazing and muirburn are clearly important land management tools. We must graze and burn wisely and strive to ensure that we do use these tools it is not to the detriment of our important soils, water quality and more sensitive habitat types.

As we have seen, upland land use is underpinned by public support. We would suggest that it is time to call a halt to those public support measures that sustain management activity that currently degrades or threaten the natural capital of our uplands and would prefer public support to be directed at management that delivers a range of public benefits. Such support may also be central to the maintenance of land management skills and practice in the uplands.

The vast majority of Scotland's land is in private ownership, though a significant area is in the hands of public (Scottish Government, Scottish Natural Heritage,



Woodland landscape near Ballater

Ian Francis

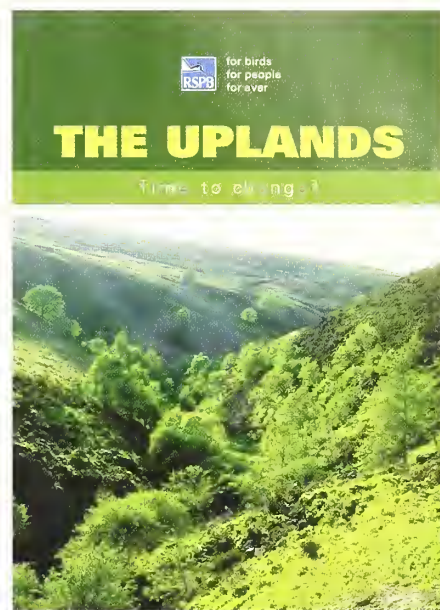
Forestry Commission Scotland) and quasi-public bodies like National Trust for Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust, RSPB Scotland and John Muir Trust. Is this land currently managed in a way that optimises the delivery of public benefits? It is surely important to lead by example and to develop models that really work both for people and place. We need these examples to demonstrate that a multi-benefit approach can work.

To be true to our cause, I think we need to be bold, challenge some sacred cows and work in new and innovative ways to find the necessary solutions to secure an upland renaissance. Scotland can play a key role here, embracing change, leading by example and helping to develop policy that meets the future needs of the uplands in a truly holistic way. Our uplands and

the amazing birds they support are truly special. It is surely up to all of us who love these special places to argue for change and to press policy makers to deliver the sort of policies that will help sustain the uplands for future generations to enjoy. Local people, people who work in the uplands and people who visit the uplands are all central to any debate about the future. Together, we need to find a way to re-vitalise our uplands for the benefit of society as a whole.

For a copy of "The Uplands – Time to change", please see: www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/projects/uplands

Pat Thompson,
RSPB Uplands Conservation Officer
(patrick.thompson@rspb.org.uk)



Birds of Scotland



The photograph above shows a copy of 'The Birds of Scotland' being presented to the Presiding Officer at the Scottish Parliament on 25 March. This was the copy that we presented to Mike Russell MSP at the launch in January, for the Scottish Parliament Information Centre. The photograph shows - left to right: Peter Peacock MSP (who proposed the Parliamentary motion welcoming the publication of The Birds of Scotland), Alex Ferguson MSP (Presiding Officer), Mike Russell MSP (Minister for Environment) and Chris Waltho (SOC President).

If you would like to invest in a copy of this historic publication, the following options are available:

Buy a copy: BS3 is now available 'over the counter' at Waterston House, Aberlady (this way more profit accrues to SOC), and from Viking Optics, 101 Rose St. Edinburgh.

Order by Post: See SOC website for Order form, or contact SOC for details.

Order by phone: You can order by phone if you pay by debit/credit card. Call the SOC on 01875 871330; please have your card details ready.

For those who have yet to invest in these splendid volumes, we are now reproducing below two of the bird profiles featured in BS3 as a sort of taster which should illustrate the quality which so many SOC members and others are now enjoying. We have decided on the Little Egret, a species fairly rare here at the moment, but heading north fast; and the Jay, a bird not very common anywhere but it is interesting now to see exactly where it can be found.

Little Egret

PV Category A

Egretta garzetta (Linnaeus)

E. g. garzetta (Linnaeus)



Little Egret, Vane Farm, Loch Leven (Perth & Kinross), November 2005 © John Anderson

Corra-gheal-bheag

Records: c. 150

UK Amber List

RBBP A

World range and taxonomy

Old World. Six subspecies. Nominate *garzetta* formerly bred only in southern Europe, North Africa and Asia, east to China and Japan, but its range expanded in western Europe, reaching the north coast of France, and breeding in England from 1996. The other subspecies breed in Africa, south-east Asia and Australasia. Populations in much of the eastern Palearctic mostly migrate to more southerly latitudes in winter, but outwith Palearctic zone, are mainly resident.

Habitat

Nests colonially in trees and bushes by marshy lakes, rivers and lagoons. Within Scotland mostly seen in estuarine and coastal areas, often on open shorelines on sea lochs. Also follows rivers on its migration, with a few individuals appearing at inland lochs.

Scottish range, distribution and status

Little Egret is a rare, but increasingly frequent, vagrant to Scotland. It is mostly seen in spring, from late April to mid-June, but is also very rarely noted in autumn and has overwintered.

The first Little Egrets were seen in Scotland in 1954 when four reports, involving at least two birds, came from Comrie (Perth & Kinross) (Crawford 1955), Clyde, Sutherland and Shetland. Early records were erratic, with seven in 1954-61, a small peak of 16 in 1969-75 and then eight in 1981-84. Only after 1986 did it become an annual visitor, and further distinct increases came in 1993 and 2002.

Well over half of occurrences are during May and June, with many individuals wandering around the country during the summer months, prior to departure by October. Overwintering on the milder south-west coast, on the Solway Firth (Dumfries & Galloway), appears to have occurred during 1972/73 and again in 1991, perhaps through to 1996. One third of all records come from south-

west Scotland, favouring such sites as Islay (Argyll) and the Solway coast and estuaries. Birds usually occur as singles, but there were four at Lochdonhead, Mull (Argyll) from 12 October to 20 November 1969 (Norwell *et al.* 1970) and three at Caerlaverock (Dumfries & Galloway) on 31 May 1995. Away from the main haunts, recording area firsts occurred rather late, e.g. Borders (1998), Badenoch & Strathspey (1998) and Upper Forth (2002). Few have been seen in Fife, and those in Perth & Kinross are centred on Vane Farm where it has become a regular visitor since the mid-1990s. One was found dead at Loch Portain, North Uist (Outer Hebrides) on 29 October 1969, with the specimen at Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow (GLAMG Z.1969.78).

The frequency of sightings in the Northern Isles has increased only slightly, with five in 1954-79 and 14 in 1981-2003. Observations are equally split between Orkney and Shetland, though there have been none in Orkney since 1998. Fair Isle still awaits its first. After records in 1955 and 1969, sightings in the Outer Hebrides have been regular since the mid-1980s and total 16. There are 11 occurrences in the North-west Highlands: Sutherland (1954, 2000, 2004), Caithness (2004), Ross & Cromarty (1981, 2000) and Skye, Lochaber & Lochalsh (1981, 1986, 1996, 1998, 2000).

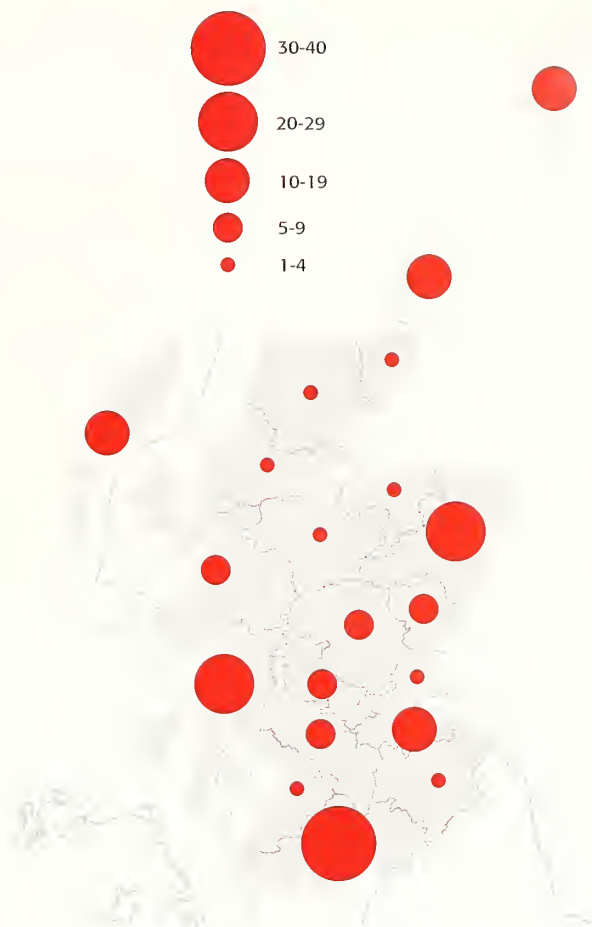
Britain lies at the northern limit of the Little Egret's range in Europe, but this has expanded northwards, possibly as a result of a series of mild winters. For many years it was a vagrant across the whole of the Britain, but numbers increased sharply in the early 1990s, and it first nested on Brownsea Island, Dorset in 1996. In 2001, c. 100 pairs bred at 18 sites in the UK; and in the following autumn 2,700 were counted, and numbers have continued to increase (Brown & Grice 2005). A local autumn count in Essex and north Kent in 2004 found 1,065 birds. It is therefore hardly surprising that numbers recorded in Scotland showed a sharp increase during the last decade of the 20th century, albeit on a much reduced scale compared to southern England, and it is possible that this species will increase further as a migrant, perhaps eventually breeding, should milder winters persist. The only limitation to its spread would appear to lie in the availability of optimal foraging habitats with abundant suitable prey. In searching for potential breeders, long-staying birds should be looked for in early spring, initially amongst existing heronries located in close proximity to suitable feeding habitat.

Additional references

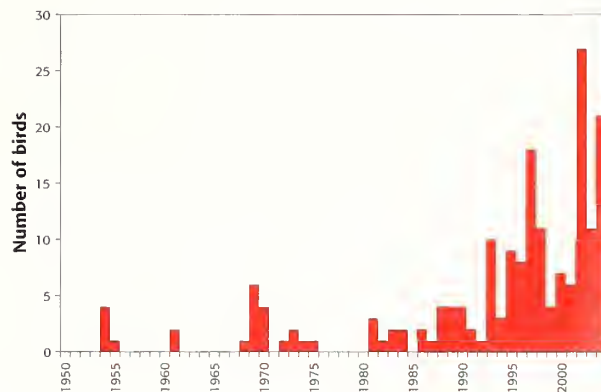
Campbell (1968), Henderson (1954), Miller & Willmet (1971), Smith *et al.* (1962), Voisin (1991).

Author Angus Hogg

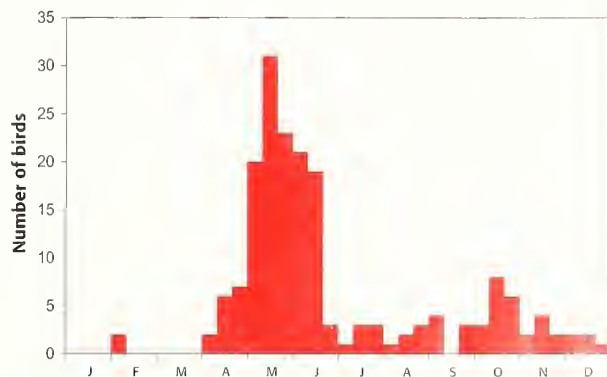
Lead editors Ian J Andrews and Bernie Zonfrillo



Distribution by recording area of Little Egret in Scotland, 1954-2004



Annual occurrence of Little Egret in Scotland, 1950-2004



Seasonal occurrence of Little Egret in Scotland, 1954-2004

Eurasian Jay

RB Category A

Garrulus glandarius (Linnaeus)

G. g. rufitergum Hartert



Eurasian Jay, Ballathie Estate (Perth & Kinross), September 2004 © Wildscotphotos/Eric McCabe

Jay

Sgreuchag-choille

Breeding: 6,000–10,000 pairs

Winter: 20,000–40,000

Main threats: persecution by gamekeepers.

World range and taxonomy

Palaearctic and Indomalaya. Thirty to 40 subspecies. Breeds throughout much of Europe, North Africa, and central and southern Asia: *rufitergum* in Britain and France; *hibernicus* in Ireland; nominate *glandarius* from France to Scandinavia east through northern and central Europe; and *severtzowi* from Fennoscandia to western Russia. Other subspecies occur in southern and eastern Europe, in North Africa and in Asia.

Usually sedentary, although some northern populations regularly move south during winter, and many populations, particularly those nesting at higher latitudes, are subject to irruptions, mainly in years when there is a failure of the acorn crop.

Habitat

A bird of both deciduous and coniferous woodland, regularly seen in large estates. Acorns are an important part of its diet, so highest densities often occur in oak woodland. Rarely observed in areas of open countryside.

In many areas, such as Lothian and Borders, mixed and deciduous woodland hold most birds (*SE Atlas*). Fewer are found in conifer plantations unless there are deciduous woodlands nearby, although in North-east Scotland many remain throughout the year in conifers, including plantations (*NE Atlas 1*). Upland oakwoods are often used for grazing and sheltering domestic livestock, and lack the dense cover in the shrub layer needed for nesting. This requirement for some cover could provide an explanation for the tendency to nest in conifer woods and feed in nearby deciduous woods (G Shaw pers. comm.).

Its habit of harvesting and caching acorns and other seeds is well known. These seeds, often transported considerable distances, are likely to play a significant part in the spread of oak and other broadleaved trees, as a proportion buried are never retrieved. As well as acorns, also eats hazel nuts, beech, various invertebrates including beetles, carrion, and in some areas visits garden peanut feeders.

Scottish range, distribution and status

Eurasian Jay is a local resident throughout much of the Scottish mainland, south of the Great Glen (Lochaber/Inverness). Highest breeding numbers are found in the southern Highlands of Perth & Kinross and Angus & Dundee, around Loch Lomond (Clyde) and in central Argyll. Birds are highly sedentary, but occasionally large groups have been recorded and vagrants on offshore islands, which probably originate from outside Scotland.

Sibbald mentioned Jay in his list of 1684, and at about the same time George Archibald recorded it in Dumfriesshire (Gladstone 1910a). It was common during the early 19th century, but decreased being exterminated from much of its range due to persecution by gamekeepers (Lumsden 1876, *B&R*, *Historical Atlas*). Numbers subsequently increased during the early 20th century following a reduction in persecution (*B&R*, *Thom*).

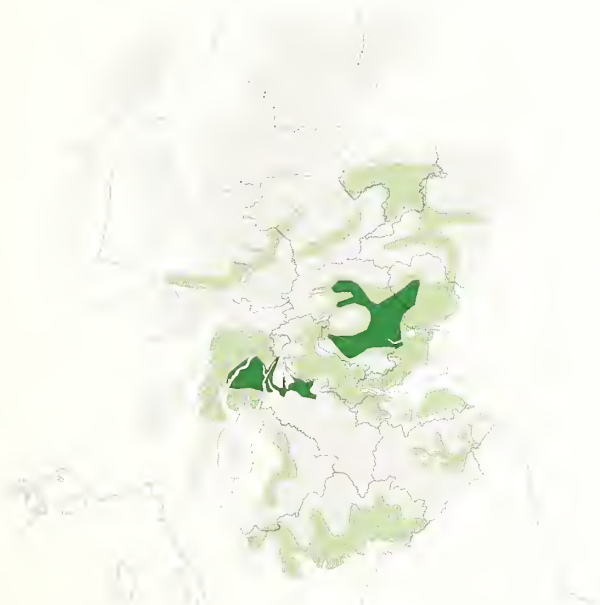
In the early 21st century, the breeding range stretches from Borders and Dumfries & Galloway northwards to Highland, North-east Scotland and Moray & Nairn. A large proportion of the population is found along the southern boundary of the Grampian Mountains from Argyll and Loch Lomond across much of lowland Perth & Kinross. The Scottish population is highly sedentary, with very few records outside breeding areas, especially on islands. Birds occasionally seen outwith these areas may well be continental immigrants. The secretive nature of this species often means that it is only noticed when it calls, and this may hide the true extent of its distribution. Over recent centuries Jay, like most other crows, has been subjected to

considerable persecution, to protect the eggs and young of game birds (*Thom*). As a result, although there has been a very gradual spread and increase in numbers since the 1970s, its current distribution does not fully reflect its natural range.

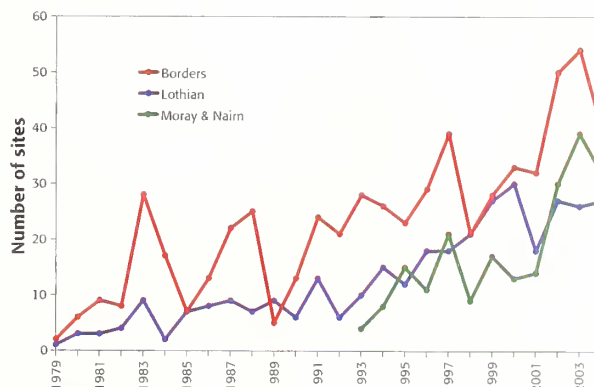
Breeding has been regular in Ayrshire and Upper Forth, and in Clyde, although it was first confirmed breeding in Renfrewshire as recently as 1990 (*Clyde BR*). In Moray & Nairn, Jays were only recorded on 14 occasions in the period 1980-90, but by 2002 there were thought to be over 100 occupied sites in Moray, with breeding confirmed at some and suspected at many more. Breeding is also increasing in Nairn (*Moray & Nairn BRs*), and it is assumed that the source of these birds is the Deeside population, which in the 1980s also spread into Donside (both North-east Scotland). The Fife population is mainly found within the south-west, central and northern areas, the parts which have most of the preferred deciduous/mixed woodland habitat. Jay was recorded in 27% of Fife tetrads during the 1990s, although it was noted that the overall scarcity of habitat was responsible for a low density (*Fife Atlas*).

The expansion of birds in the heavily-keepered Lothian and Borders is clearly shown by comparing the breeding range between the *Breeding Atlas I* where birds were reported from just 13 of the 10-km squares in 1968-72 and the *SE Atlas* where they were seen in no fewer than 34 squares in 1988-94.

Within Highland, the species has expanded its range since the mid-1980s when it was described as a vagrant (Dennis 1984), though breeding appears to be restricted to Inverness, Badenoch & Strathspey and Lochaber, and is only rarely confirmed. Jays are regularly seen at certain locations, such as Roy Bridge (Lochaber) and Strathfarrar (Inverness), but with small influxes occasionally noted it is not clear to what extent these occurrences involve local breeding or passage birds. In August to December 2003 a notable influx of at least 25 birds was recorded in Inverness, Lochaber and Badenoch & Strathspey, with a further two in Ross & Cromarty and a single in Sutherland. These observations were spread throughout the year and peaked with an unprecedented six birds at Insh Marshes (Badenoch & Strathspey) on 5 November.



Breeding and winter distribution of Eurasian Jay in Scotland



Annual occurrence of Eurasian Jay in Lothian, Borders and Moray & Nairn, 1979-2004. Note: the Moray & Nairn data refer to the breeding season only

There are areas in north and west Scotland where Jay is almost unknown. Prior to the 2003 invasion there were only three records in Sutherland: one at Dornoch on 23 September 1944, one in the Borgie Forest on 3 July 1975 and another in Assynt in May 1998. The first two birds may have been of continental origin (Vittery 1997a). In Shetland, there are only two records from Halligarth, Unst on 26 August 1861 and 3-4 also on Unst at Baltasound sometime in the 1890s (Saxby 1874, Venables & Venables 1955). A claim from Fair Isle in mid-May 1940 was unconfirmed (Dymond 1991). There is one sighting from Orkney, a bird on North Ronaldsay on 11 May 1967 (Slater 1967b). There are only two records from Islay, in 1969 and 1970, three from Mull (both Argyll) and none from Skye (Skye & Lochalsh). It remains rare in Wester Ross (Ross & Cromarty), and there are no recent occurrences in Caithness (Manson 2002) or the Outer Hebrides.

There have been 15 ringing recoveries of Jays in Scotland, but only one involved a movement of more than 6 km, a bird marked in Dirlerton (Lothian) on 24 November 1983 was retrapped in Chester-le-Street, Durham on 13 December 1986, 155 km to the south south-east. All the other 14 records tend to confirm the sedentary nature of Jay in Scotland.

Large gatherings of Jays, of local origin, have been noted in years of good acorn crops. Birds can travel several kilometres from the source of acorns to the caching site, and have been observed roosting in large numbers (S J Petty pers. comm.). Such gatherings include 18 at Endrick Mouth (Clyde) on 7 October 1979, 28 in Devilla Forest (Fife) in August 1996 and 17 at Fincastle (Perth & Kinross) on 7 August 1999 (SBRs).

Irruptions of Jays into Britain from the north and central European populations, believed to be due to acorn failure, occurred in 1955, 1977 and 1983 (BWP), though there is no clear evidence of any arrival of birds in Scotland in either 1955 or 1977. In 1983 there were large movements in southern Britain during September and October, with smaller movements at the same time in some parts of Scotland (John & Roskell 1985). Birds were seen along the east coast. In Borders there were eight at St Abb's Head on 24 October, seven at Ayton Castle on 28 October and seven at Eyemouth on 18 November. In East Lothian, where there had been only three previous records in the 20th century, counts included seven at Dirlerton on 12 November and six at Tynninghame on 17 November. A large movement then took place at Dirlerton on 25 January 1984 with 45 noted flying west in parties of 6-20 in one and a half hours and a total of 80 on the following day. These were probably birds going to roost (M W Fraser pers. comm.). Additionally, in 1982, a year before the large national influx, an astonishing 320 birds were seen on 17 October prior to roosting near Penicuik (Lothian), with 123 still present on the following day (Young 1984).

It was suggested that birds in the large 1982 roost near Penicuik may have been of continental origin (Young 1984). The 1983 sightings in areas of Lothian and Borders, where Jay is otherwise rare, together with the old Shetland records, suggest that continental birds, most likely nominate *glandarius*, can reach Scotland. However, the species shows a great reluctance to cross even narrow stretches of water,

and there is no ringing evidence to confirm that the 1983 movement in Britain included any continental birds (John & Roskell 1985). Scottish observers should also be aware of the possibility of *hibernicus* from Ireland reaching our shores. There are, however, no positive records in Scotland of any subspecies other than *rufitergum*.

Breeding cycle

Jay is believed to be monogamous and to pair for life, so many adults will not have to seek a mate at the onset of the breeding season, but begin defending an already-established home-range. Ranges tend to increase in size during spring and overlap with those of neighbouring pairs (Rolando 1998). This does not, however, preclude the formation of social gatherings of up to 20 birds in early spring. Such groups are presumed to be unpaired birds, though the cause of these gatherings, which take place with other crow species, has not been established.

Nest building begins in early spring, from mid-March onwards with the nest sites often in thicket-stage broadleaved and coniferous woodland (S J Petty pers. comm.). In plantations, nests are often just below or just into the canopy, and always against the main stem (G Shaw pers. comm.). Jay is single brooded with a clutch size averaging 5.5 eggs, though sometimes as high as ten (BWP). The incubation period lasts 16-17 days. Broods average four and the young normally fledge in three weeks. In Britain, the first eggs are usually laid from mid-April to early June, but in Scottish forests birds are mostly seen carrying food in June and July, which indicates a slightly later season, probably reflecting the later flush of caterpillars (G Shaw pers. comm.). Adults are also often seen taking large black slugs *Arion ater* to feed the young. It is difficult to find fledged broods in conifers, and family parties first become noticeable in late July and August, when they move out to exploit tree fruits; cherries are a particular favourite. Dates of records of the only family parties recorded in Lothian and Borders since 1990 are as follows: 31 May, 15 August, 29 June, 10 July, 4 July, 3 July and 16 August (Lothian BRs, Borders BRs). Given its sedentary nature, post-breeding dispersal is very limited.

Population

There were estimated to be 160,000 pairs in UK in 2000 of which, based on frequency index data from *Breeding Atlas II*, 7,000 pairs were considered to be in Scotland (BiE2/BTO). The Scottish population has, however, never been fully surveyed and estimates vary considerably within areas where attempts have been made to count birds. For example, the breeding population in Fife was estimated at 600-1,000 pairs during 1991-99 (Fife Atlas) and within Dumfries & Galloway, where it is a common breeding bird, estimates range from 400 to 2,500 pairs (P N Collin pers. comm.). Perth & Kinross is considered to be the single most important area for Jay in Scotland; there the population is estimated at some few thousands of pairs and considered to be stable (R E Youngman pers. comm.). The estimate for Lothian and Borders during 1988-94 was 125-150 pairs (SE Atlas). Taking into account the smaller numbers present in Highland, North-east Scotland and elsewhere, the breeding population is probably within the range 6,000-10,000 pairs. Based on this, a wintering population of 20,000-40,000 birds is likely.

Trends

A range expansion occurred in the second half of the 20th century. In particular, there have been signs of population growth since the 1980s into or within Lothian, Borders, Fife, North-east Scotland and Moray & Nairn. Taken together with evidence of a northerly expansion within the Highland area, including the first breeding record for Badenoch & Strathspey in 2003 (*Highland BR*), these developments suggest that this shy and retiring bird is returning to many of its original breeding areas in Scotland, and possibly some new ones.

This expansion is likely to have been the result of a general reduction in keeping and of the increase in forest cover. The significant increase in plantation forests since 1920 has created new habitats suitable for Jay since the 1960s, albeit at low density. This has probably been the major factor in the expansion; importantly, many of these new woodland habitats are free from persecution (S J Petty pers. comm.).

Threats

Jay is one of a small number of quarry species that can legally be controlled, and this is reflected in the fact that almost three-quarters of all ringing recoveries in Britain are of birds deliberately killed (*Migration Atlas*). Despite the role it plays in the regeneration of broadleaved trees and shrubs, persecution by gamekeepers still remains a serious local problem in many areas, including where it is scarce. Were persecution to stop, this far from common species would benefit. There seems no reason why Jay should still be a prey species, and it seems appropriate that it should now be given legal protection.

Gaps in current knowledge

Little work has taken place on Jay in Scotland and most of what we presume of its life history is based on studies that have taken place elsewhere. There is in particular a need for the Scottish population to be surveyed; even in areas where regional breeding atlases have been published, the population estimates are imprecise.

Determination of the proportions of birds nesting in coniferous and deciduous woodlands would be of value, as would assessments of density levels in different habitats. Some work is also required on the diet of Jay in woodland habitats lacking oak. Nothing is known about the relationship between birds using neighbouring ranges, whether territorial behaviour is exhibited, or about spacing requirements between pairs in differing habitats. The extent to which recolonisation and expansion of range in recent decades is linked to reduced persecution is unknown.

Additional references

Alston (1913), Bossema (1979), Cramp *et al.* (1960), Gladstone (1912b), Madge & Burn (1994), Rowallan (1958).

Author Alastair F McNee

Lead editor Ron Forrester



NOTES & COMMENT

Some off-beat camera opportunities

Frank Stark regularly contacts us from Lewis where he photographs wildlife of all kinds. As usual his sightings are a shade unusual – he writes... I have attached a shot that I took last summer of a Buzzard catching an eel. I came over the brow of a hill and disturbed the bird while it was “fishing” in a small stream at the foot of the glen. As it flew away from me, you can clearly see the eel twisting around the Buzzard’s leg as the bird holds the wriggling fish tightly in its talons. The second picture of the Hooded Crow was quite unexpected; I had put out apples on a tree to attract Redwings and the resulting visitor was a bit bigger than I had in mind! The third photo was really a split – second chance to catch a Heron being mobbed by a local Herring Gull.

Frank Stark



Buzzard with Eel

Frank Stark



The apple thief

Frank Stark



Heron and gull

Frank Stark

(Eds. – any notes of interesting sightings, especially with photos, are very welcome)



Injured wing detail

Iain Livingstone

Thorn Bird

On the 13th August 2006, Shona Quinn and I were ringing passerines in the North Haugh Constant Effort Site, Strathclyde Country Park, Motherwell. During a net round, we caught a juvenile Bullfinch – nothing unusual about this, however when I was taking the bird out the bird bag, I felt a sudden sharp pain in the palm of my left hand. It would be unknown for a Bullfinch to normally inflict any damage to your hands so I was a little surprised. Once out of the bag however I found a large Hawthorn thorn sticking through the bird’s wing!

On closer inspection, I saw that the thorn had entered the wing from the underside, passing between the radius and ulna and out the other side, projecting some 6mm or so from the outer surface of the median coverts. At the entry site there was a collection of dried serum and pus, scabbing over the wide end of the thorn (see photo). Clearly this was not a recent injury.

Bullfinches are not the strongest of creatures, but after some discussion we decided it would be better to at least try to remove this from its wing in case it became infected or got tangled in vegetation. After carefully loosening the scab we were able to push the thorn back through from the outer wing to the underside. The wound was clean and there was no bleeding. The thorn measured 14mm in length (see photo) and was fairly fresh.

We can only conclude that this had happened while the bird was exercising as a well grown chick, perhaps while close to the nest in a Hawthorn bush, and had been able to break the thorn off the branch to get free. It is not uncommon for us to catch birds that have survived previous injuries e.g. missing leg, ruptured eyes, fractured mandibles etc., but this is a very unusual injury and we have never seen anything like it previously. The bird was in good physical condition and flew off normally upon release.

Iain Livingstone & Shona Quinn
Clyde Ringing Group



The thorn

Iain Livingstone

Nuthatch feeding on Birch sap

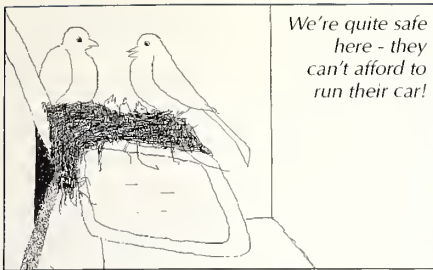
An interesting bit of feeding behaviour was observed involving the Dalzell Nuthatches mentioned in *SBN* 87. My attention was drawn to Blue Tits flying to and from a tall slender Birch which had brown staining down the bark. It appeared that they were taking sap from the surface. The Nuthatch, which was breeding nearby, joined in this behaviour, supping the liquid from various cracks in the bark surface. Sap is mentioned as a food item in *BWP* but I had never witnessed it being taken before. Incidentally, this pair of Nuthatches is the latest of four successful pairs breeding in the same woodland – still the only known breeding incidence in Lanarkshire.

Jimmy Maxwell



Nuthatch sap-feeding

Lang Stewart



Reaction of Blue Tits to Woodcock

During February and March 2006, Woodcock, probably wintering birds, flushed on five occasions as I made my way through open damp woodland; at Camghouran, Rannoch on 25th February (one bird), at the confluence of the Rivers Tay and Tummel on 2nd March (two birds) and at King's Myre, near Murthly on 18th March (One bird, three times). On each occasion Blue Tits immediately alarmed, in a manner resembling their reaction to a bird of prey.

Ron Youngman

Caption Competition

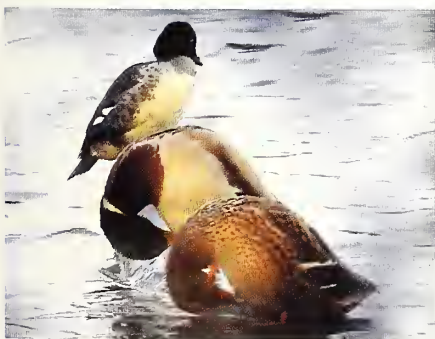
Provide a caption for the bird picture below and have a chance of winning an SOC item. Each SBN edition will feature a new photo. The winner and other best captions will be shown in SBN 89. Send your single caption by E-mail to: jimmy.maxwell @virgin.net (or of course by mail to the SOC – see Page 3)



Mallard and Cormorant

Jim Scrimgeour

The winning Caption from SBN 87 (see photo below) came from Hugh MacDonald with – "Right you two! Her Majesty's inspecting the swans now." Well done! Other runner-ups were – "Make out you haven't seen her" – Nick Carter and "Why are we bowing to him? He's not a King Eider!" – A. John Parsons.



Ducks

Stewart Love



A Raven mask from the Tlingit Inuit (Eskimo) in NW Alaska

Ornithological Folklore

5. The Raven

One of my favourite birds - they nest in the wood above my house. The folklore of the Raven is rich and diverse, being found from China to Alaska and throughout Europe and the Middle East. The companion of Munro tickers, regarded by deer stalkers as a herald of good luck on the chase if they hear a Raven croak, nonetheless in much folklore and fable it is a bird of doom, the herald of death. The Raven 'is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements' [Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 5].

The Raven is a carrion eater, and given Man's propensity to kill other men over the ages, the bird's association with the dead strewn over the battlefield has been a factor in developing its bad reputation.

One of the oldest poems in the Scots dialect, *The Twa Corbies*, begins:

*As I was walking all alane
I heard twa corbies making a mane,
The tane unto t'other say
'Where shall we gang and dine today?'*

*'In behint yon auld fail dyke
I wot there lies a new-slain knight;
And naeboddy kens that he lies there,
But his hawk, his hound and lady fair'.*

*'His hound is to the hunting gain,
His hawk to fetch the wild-game hame,
His lady's ta'en another mate,
So we may make our dinner sweet!'*

Corbie is the name given to Ravens in Orkney, Shetland and northern Scotland, deriving from the Latin name *Corvus*, which dates back to middle English and Old French. The Celtic goddesses, the Badbh [the Raven of battle] and the Morrigan have the ability to shapeshift into the form of a Raven. Badbh lingers on in Scots folklore as Cailleach, a dreadful hag, who may appear as a Raven and whose day is March 25th. The Raven mask [C.19] originates with the Tlingit Inuit [Eskimo] in N.W. Alaska. The Raven print is by John James Audubon, Plate 101 in the Birds of America.

Michael Thomas



Print by John James Audubon - Plate 101 in the 'Birds of America'

BOOK REVIEWS

**BBi 1907-2007
British Birds
interactive.**
BirdGuides Ltd,
2007. DVD.



This DVD contains all the contents of 100 volumes of the *British Birds* journal – Vol. 1 (1907-08) to Vol. 100 (2007). For a full description of this product, including example screens, readers should visit the BirdGuides website at <http://www.birdguides.com/products/bbi/default.asp>. In this review I will concentrate on my first impressions of the software, how easy it is to use, and whether it does what it says on the tin.

The software runs on most modern operating systems (Windows Vista, Windows XP, Windows 2000, Mac OS X 10.5.x and Mac OS X 10.4.x) and uses the same design as successfully used for *BWPI*. The download process was simple. I operated the software direct from the DVD drive, which made for a slower but quite acceptable operating speed.

Once downloaded, it is hard to know where to start! It is amazing to suddenly have 100 years of information at your fingertips – a whole groaning bookshelf encapsulated in your computer's memory! So how easy is it to extract that bit of information that you want? Well, quite easy. Searches can be carried out via four main indexes – BB volume/year number, All species index, Topic index or *BWPI* Species Index. I made use of all these search tools for browsing through articles on single species or certain years. No more traipsing back and forward from the library desk to find the right shelf and volume number! In addition, the Features menu offers a keyword search function. I found this tool to be the most effective at pulling out the most exhaustive list of articles, notes etc on your subject. Filter tools enable you to narrow your search to view only full articles, illustrations, photographs etc.

When you click on a subject of interest, a window appears containing an exact replica (pdf file type) image of the first section of the article, with a useful index to the article alongside it with the main subject headings and references, so these can be quickly accessed. Frustratingly, the window doesn't show the whole page width of the article. To do this you have to Right-click on the article and select the Open with Acrobat option. Once you've learnt this trick, then you're flying. The Acrobat image is just like

reading the pages of BB, complete with all diagrams, tables and photographs.

Would I buy *BBi*? Definitely. This product is an invaluable tool for accessing the last 100 years of history of British Birds, and will provide a valuable starting point for anyone carrying out research on British Birds well into the future. Had it been around a few years ago it would have been a great help to the authors of *BS3*. I look forward to the day when we can access *Scottish Bird Reports* and *Scottish Birds* in the same format.

Clive McKay

Scottish Bird Records Co-ordinator, SOC

Ornithological Tales, An Introduction to the birds on the Isle of Bute.

Michael Thomas OBE, Illustrators/Photographers Various. The Buteshire Natural History Society ISBN 0 905812 15 8, A5 Paperback (Condensed from 4 volumes), £5.00 plus £1.50 p&p.

As the author says, this is not an identification guide to the birds of Bute, however it does contain a very useful checklist, by season, of the birds found on Bute and this book is a series of "Tales" about those birds. There are about forty tales covering about sixty species. They give useful background to the occurrence of the birds within Bute as well as more general information on their position within Great Britain as a whole. The visitor is also provided with the best sites to observe the birds.

One feature of the book is the literary references which pepper the tales – bringing to life some of the historical appreciation of our birdlife. This highlights the author's obvious enjoyment of both birds and literature. This charming little

book can be dipped into again and again to both inform and entertain.



Available from The Buteshire Natural History Society, Bute Museum, 7 Stewart Street, Rothesay, Isle of Bute, PA20 0EP.

William Torrance

RSPB Secret Lives of Garden Wildlife.

Dominic Cousins, Illustrated by Peter Partington. A&C Black ISBN 978-0-7136-8534-3, A4 Paperback, £14.99.

This is one of a series which includes *Secret Lives of British Birds* and *Secret Lives of Garden Birds*, all by the same author/illustrator combination.

The book looks at the behavior of the common and occasionally less common garden wildlife in an unusually accessible style, imparting intriguing information about individual species and their interactions with other species. The chapters are by organised calendar month and well-illustrated, and an index is included. If you are interested butterflies, wasps, ladybirds, creepy crawlies, what animals one may hear on a winter night, conservation gardening or many other topics, you are likely to find them here.

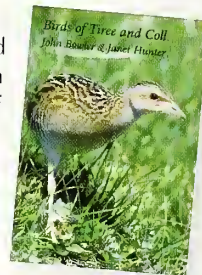


There is a substantial amount of information about birds including sections on migration, territorial squabbles, survival and "goodies and baddies" amongst others. Whether you are new to wildlife or just enjoy a look at life from a different perspective, this is very pleasant book to read.

Jean Torrance

Birds of Tiree & Coll, John Bowler & Janet Hunter 2007. Pairwood Publishing, Isle of Tiree, ISBN 1-905601-01-8 (softback), 208 pp, 16 pp of colour photos.

The book is divided into three main sections – 27 pages of introductory chapters, the main species accounts (168 pp) and 10 pages of Appendices.



Useful introductory chapters provide information on Geography, Habitats, Birds Through the Seasons, Where to see Birds and other Wildlife and Birds and Local Folklore. A Bird Chart summarises the monthly occurrence of the main species on both islands.

The species accounts are very thorough. Broad margins provide space for species' Gaelic names and status statements, as well as "off the shelf" RSPB line drawings for many species. Seasonal occurrence of scarcer species is neatly summarised by means of simple tables of total number of monthly records. The colour plates portray a nice mix of the islands' characteristic species, as well as a nice selection of rarities photographed on the islands. This mixture of species is the essence of the islands' bird fauna, which is well described.

The Appendices include useful lists of the non-bird groups found on the islands – mammals, amphibians, dragonflies, butterflies etc, as well as full bird checklists and a useful update of recent/unconfirmed rarities.

At long last, we now have a worthy successor to the *Birds of Coll & Tiree* (Stroud et al. 1989). Much new information has been gathered over the last 15 years on the birds of Tiree and Coll, partly as a result of the presence of full-time RSPB staff on both islands. If you're visiting the islands, this book will tell you what you're likely to see, where to go to see it, and will put your sightings into an overall context. This is a well thought out, well-presented and well-researched book, and the authors can be rightfully proud of their achievement in bringing us up to date with the unique bird life of these two beautiful and unique islands.

Clive McKay

Birds of Essex, Simon Wood 2007. Helm ISBN 978-0-7136-6939-8 rrp £40.00 Hardback.

This informative and readable book is another entry in the Helm "County Avifauna" series and is a hefty 585 pages (648 including appendices). This series follows a standard format with details and ranges of all species recorded in the county.

Several estuarine areas of International Importance to migratory and wintering wildfowl are to be found in Essex. The county is diverse in habitat and rich in birdlife but in parts is only a stone's throw from London and the pressures of urbanisation.

The individual species accounts cover the 200 years to 2004. They are supplemented by frequency charts and line drawings and are well supported by the introductory sections on weather, habitat and history, by the prehistoric fossil record and by extensive appendices, including records for 2005.

Jean Torrance

New Holland European Bird Guide. Peter Barthel and Paschalis Dougalis, 2008 New Holland, London. ISBN 9871847731104 191 pages, Paperback £10.99.

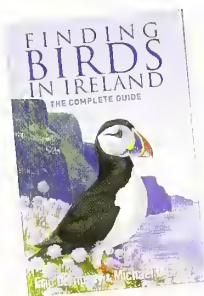
It must be quite brave for a publisher to launch yet another field guide considering the variety already available, but it quickly

becomes obvious that this is a worthy newcomer. The book is pliable and pocketable, contains over 1700 good illustrations, a colour-coded guide for quick reference making the index almost superfluous, 18 pages explaining orders and families, plus a useful 13 pages devoted to song and calls for selected species.

While covering Europe, each species has its British presence defined although the breeding distribution maps are of only of marginal use due to their very small size. This is a really comprehensive compact book, which comes with a feel-good factor exemplified by its competitive price.

Keith Macgregor

Finding Birds in Ireland: The Complete Guide, Eric Dempsey & Michael O'Clery 2007. Gill & Macmillan ISBN 978 07171 3916 3 Soft back 20 euros.



Away from the long-established birding hot spots of the island of Ireland, a great part of this lovely country is virtually unknown territory to the average Scottish birdwatcher. Much has changed during the past fifteen years and this new guide is just one example of how dynamic the birding scene is in Ireland these days. This comprehensive and beautifully illustrated reference guide covers over 400 of the best bird-watching sites in Ireland, north and south. Arranged by county, each site has a grid reference, coloured maps and detailed directions. A colour-coded "best time to visit" chart is a very useful quick reference, as are details of the key species present at different times of year.

This is a very user-friendly site guide, packed with essential information and no birder visiting Ireland should be without a copy.

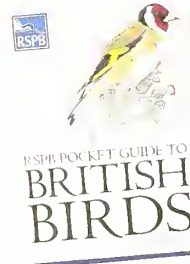
David Clugston

RSPB Pocket Guide to British Birds Simon Harrap 2007 Helm ISBN -13:978-0-7136-8707-1 Paperback £4.99.

This book is aimed at beginners of any age, and on the whole it does a good job within that scope. The 13-page introduction covering general topics is well done. The distribution maps, covering only Britain and Ireland, are more detailed and easier

to interpret than in any European guide, though their apparent precision may mislead beginners. The text is generally clear, the illustrations are mostly good, and if about 10% are not, that is not abnormal. Species with limited British ranges are mostly omitted, e.g. Crested Tit (!), Twite, Cirl Bunting, and Black-throated Diver, but Snow Bunting and Red-throated Diver are in. It really is a pocket book at 170 x 116 x 12mm, and at £4.99 is probably the best value you will get. But if the beginner's interest develops they will grow out of it in a couple of years whatever their age.

John Law



Where to Watch Birds in France Philippe J Dubois (editor) 2006 Christopher Helm 0-7136-6980 Pbk £16.99.

The first English edition of this 'Where to Watch' was published in 1992. This very substantially revised work appeared in French in 2004, and is the result of the submission by a substantial number of local experts: there are 337 sites covered in all, about a third in greater detail with maps. All the obvious ones are there, and many others that you might not find otherwise. It is in a fairly standard form, giving some basic information about each site, how to get there and suggested route, and what might be seen at various times of year. I have detected one or two minor additions, perhaps from the personal knowledge of Ken Hall and Tony Williams, the translators.

We have used the French edition each year since its appearance, and found it very useful (albeit with occasional problems with French bird names). I therefore have no hesitation in recommending the English translation. My only criticism, perhaps, is that it is arranged alphabetically by French region. This is quite natural for the French, of course, but does require some knowledge of the regions, and departments within them, to use. A north to south arrangement might have been easier. However I can see that this would have involved more work and cost, as the layout, including placing of sketch maps and line drawings, is identical in French and English versions.



John Dainoff



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Paperback
£16.99

Birdwatchers bound for Spain are very well served by guides to finding birds there - the recent Lynx catalogue lists eighteen books, including this one. The volume covers 200 sites in Andalusia, Extremadura and Gibraltar. The information provided is very complete. Excellent maps, web-site information, advice on timing visits, disabled facilities, hints on where to stay, and a commendable discussion of conservation issues in this country where economic and tourist development tends to sweep all before it. This area of Spain still has some wonderfully rich and unspoilt habitats in which to locate regional specialities such as Ruppell's Vulture, Andalusian Hemipode, Red-knobbed Coot, White-rumped and Little Swift. A concentration of Spanish Imperial Eagle, the great wintering flocks of Cranes, and some prime migration watching sites - this is probably the best birdwatching in Western Europe, with a guide to match.

This book must be in your ruck-sack when you next board a Cheepo airline to the land of sun, sangria and marvellous birds.

Michael Thomas

Birds of Argyll. ap Rheinalt, T., Craik, J.C.A., Daw, P., Furness, R.W., Petty, S.J. & Wood, D. (eds.) Argyll Bird Club. 2007. Argyll Bird Club ISBN 978-0-9557777-0-7 2007. Bob Furness, The Cnoc, Tarbet, Arrochar, Dunbartonshire G83 7DG. ISBN 978 0 9557777 0 7. 424 pages, Hardback £45. Available from Bob Furness, The Cnoc, Tarbet, Arrochar, Dunbartonshire G83 7DG. Tel: 01301 702603, Email: r.furness@bio.gla.ac.uk



Over the years there have been several accounts of the birds of particular parts of Argyll, eg Iona and Mull, Mid Argyll and Colonsay. This is the first book devoted to Argyll as a whole and reflects the growth in bird recording that has taken place mainly due to the formation of the Argyll Bird Club in 1985 and incorporates 25 years of bird records published in the Argyll Bird Report.

This is an A4 full-colour hardback book of over 400 pages. There are introductory chapter on Argyll and its habitats and a

very helpful chapter on where to watch birds in Argyll giving grid references and a bird list for each site.

The main part of the book contains accounts of the 328 species recorded in Argyll and reflects the authors' comprehensive knowledge of the local wildlife and habitats. There are many high quality photographs taken by local photographers, both amateur and professional. There are also excellent black and white drawings by Philip Snow and Margaret Staley.

The species accounts vary in length depending on whether the bird is commonly seen in the area. For example, the entry on Golden Eagle covers two and a half pages illustrating the fact that Argyll holds some 20% of the Scottish population. By contrast, the entry on the Hobby has two paragraphs as it is an occasional visitor to the area.

This is an excellent book and is an invaluable contribution to bird conservation and management of their habitats. It will be welcomed by bird watchers from all over the world who visit the area. Indeed it will surely encourage others who have not yet visited Argyll to do so - soon!

Doreen Main

The Ornithologist's Dictionary by Johannes Eririzoe, Kaj Kampp, Kevi Winker and Clifford B Firth. Lynx November 2007, ISBN 978-84-96553-43-9, Paperback, 290 pages, £13.50

The alternative title to this intriguing, compact volume is "Ornithological and Related Technical Terms for Layman and Expert" which defines the book itself. The definitions therein are concise and readily understood. I haven't counted, but the cover notes claim that in excess of 5000 English (in all its varieties) ornithological terms are defined.

Definitions recognize and cross reference American and English usage. Whilst some of the information in this book might be obtained from a multitude of sources such as the internet, this volume is comprehensive, authoritative, readable and very interesting. It is even illustrated with a black and white sketch 'illuminating' each letter of the alphabet.

Jean Torrance

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The Page 2 photograph is of:
flying Barnacle Geese

ISBN 0268-3199

Scottish Bird News

Scottish Bird News is the magazine of the SOC. It acts as a channel of communication for SOC members and disseminates information relevant to Scotland's birdlife. It is published four times a year in March, June, September and December. Articles and notices are welcomed and should be sent to the Editors at the address below no later than five weeks before publication. The views expressed are not necessarily the policy of the SOC. Contributors should note that material has to be edited, often at short notice, and it is not practical to let authors see these changes in advance of publication.

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The Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) was established by a group of Scottish ornithologists who met together in the rooms of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh on 24th March 1936.

The Club now has 2200 members and 14 branches around Scotland. It plays a central role in Scottish birdwatching, bringing together amateur birdwatchers, keen birders and research ornithologists with the aims of documenting, studying and, not least, enjoying Scotland's varied birdlife. Above all, the SOC is a club, relying heavily on keen volunteers and the support of its membership.

Headquarters provide central publications and an annual conference, and houses the Waterston Library, the most comprehensive library of bird literature in Scotland. The network of branches, which meet in Aberdeen, Ayr, the Borders, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, New Galloway, Orkney, St Andrews, Stirling, Stranraer and Thurso, organise field meetings, a winter programme of talks and social events.

The SOC also supports the Local Recorders' Network and the Scottish Birds Records Committee. The latter maintains the 'official' Scottish List on behalf of the Club. The Club supports research and survey work through its Research Grants.

The Club maintains a regularly-updated web site, which not only contains much information about the Club, but is also the key source of information about birds and birdwatching in Scotland. SOC is a registered Scottish charity (no SC 009859).

www.the-soc.org.uk

**Passwords to access members' web pages
on the SOC web site:
'white' & 'wagtail'**

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